

THE NATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL LABORATORY ACCREDITATION CONFERENCE (NELAC)

NELAC

The National Environmental Laboratory Accreditation Conference (NELAC), established in 1995, is a voluntary association formed to establish and promote performance standards for the inspection and operation of environmental laboratories in support of the National Environmental Laboratory Program (NELAP). The goal of NELAC is to foster the generation of environmental laboratory data of known and acceptable quality on which to base public health and environmental management decisions. The standards are developed by the States, the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and other federal agencies with private sector input. States and Federal agencies serve as primary Accrediting Authorities with EPA oversight to assure uniformity. Accreditation is recognized by the other states and federal agencies approved under NELAP. This fundamental of unconditional reciprocity, which reduces redundant and conflicting accreditation requirements, is the heart of NELAC.

NELAP

The National Environmental Laboratory Accreditation Program (NELAP) is the EPA program which administers and oversees the NELAC process. NELAP oversees the state and federal accrediting authorities and will serve as the accrediting authority for a limited number of state laboratories. NELAP received applications from 19 states requesting NELAP recognition as accrediting authorities during 1998. Other states have indicated that they will be applying in 1999.

Which states can participate in NELAC?

Every state is encouraged to participate in the development and adoption of the NELAC laboratory and accreditation program standards whether or not the state intends to seek NELAP recognition as an Accrediting Authority. States may also choose to require laboratories in their state to seek NELAP accreditation.

With states as accrediting authorities, how is the program national?

All states and federal agencies which have a NELAP-approved accreditation program must adhere to the standards adopted by NELAC and be inspected by qualified NELAP assessors in order to become a NELAP Accrediting Authority. Such Accrediting Authorities also must agree to recognize other NELAP-approved lab accreditation programs.

How does the private sector participate in NELAC?

The private sector, i.e., commercial laboratories, industry, and environmental consulting firms as well as local government labs, are encouraged to attend the conferences and contribute information and recommendations in the development of all standards. Although not voting members, the private sector constitutes half the members of all standing and administrative committees. The private sector also provides consensus advice through the Environmental Laboratory Advisory Board. Finally, the private sector can participate in any NELAC meeting and provide individual comments at any time.

Won't NELAC accreditation be a burden on small laboratories?

The NELAC standards are a flexible system, allowing small laboratories to be accredited for specific analytical methods only. The activities of small laboratories required under NELAC will be comparable to their scope of accreditation.

Does my laboratory need to be accredited?

NELAC will provide accreditation standards for laboratories under all EPA programs, with the possible exception of those laboratories regulated under EPA's Good Laboratory Practices program. Although NELAP is a voluntary program, state and federal agencies may make participation mandatory for the labs under their jurisdiction.

How will my lab benefit from NELAC?

Commercial labs will benefit because adherence to NELAC standards will:

- ! replace redundant and often contradictory inspections with comprehensive standardized inspections;
- ! Improve acceptability of data to regulators and customers;
- ! will enhance the laboratory's ability to compete internationally;
- ! significantly reduce the substantial indirect costs associated with redundant accreditation activities.

Industry/municipal in-house labs will benefit because adherence to NELAC standards will:

- ! establish credibility of data;
- ! improve acceptability of data to regulatory agencies.

How will a laboratory apply for national accreditation?

Private and local government laboratories will need to apply to the NELAP-recognized Accrediting Authority of the state in which their testing facility is located. If that state does not have a NELAP-recognized Accrediting Authority or its program is of limited scope, a lab may apply for accreditation to another state for those analyses not included in their home state's program. A few state and federal laboratories will have the option of applying through the federally administered NELAP program.

What is the basis of NELAC accreditation?

All laboratories must complete and submit an application form, pay any required fees, pass an on-site inspection, demonstrate qualifications of testing personnel and participate in two NELAP-recognized single-blind, single-sample proficiency tests per year for each field of testing for which it seeks or wants to maintain accreditation. On-site assessments of each laboratory, which include compliance with specified quality assurance standards, will be conducted at least once every two years.

When does my lab need to be accredited?

The first state applications for accrediting authority are expected to be approved in 1999, and it will take six to nine months following state approval before the first labs will be accredited in those states. Other states are reviewing the requirements and preparing for the accreditation process.

What will this cost?

In many of the states, it is anticipated that costs will be borne by the participating laboratories through accreditation fees, which will vary depending upon several factors including the number of methods for which the laboratories are seeking accreditation. Fees for accreditation in other states will be assessed based on that state's program. Additionally, laboratories will be required to pay for the required PT samples.

What do I need to do now?

! Familiarize your laboratory with the NELAC standards and get a clear understanding of what they say and what will be expected. Current NELAC standards can be found on the NELAC website.

! Determine to which state your laboratory will apply for NELAP accreditation. If your home state is not a NELAP accrediting authority or the scope of accreditation is too limited for your lab, you should seek information about other state NELAP-recognized programs.

! Start reviewing your laboratory's systems to determine conformance with the new standards.

! **BECOME INVOLVED IN NELAC!**
Information on the next semiannual meeting can be found on the NELAC website.

NELAC WEBSITE:

<http://www.epa.gov/ttn/nelac>

No Internet Access? Call: Carolyn Cross at
(919) 541-3151.



National Environmental
Laboratory **Accreditation**
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